

Archaeology and the Tanach

1. Filling in the gaps

Seated round a table in one of the inner rooms at the British Museum the visitors were looking at a three and a half thousand year old Egyptian mud brick. The straw was still visible. Stamped on its surface was the royal seal of Ramesses II, the pharaoh for whom our ancestors built a city of the same name. They sat there wide-eyed, open-mouthed. “Wow!” breathed one almost inaudibly. It was an emotional experience such as none of them had imagined. It is at moments such as this that one sees the value, and the power, of archaeology.

But what about our *meforshim*? We have no shortage of great and holy people who have elucidated the Tanach for us. Should we not stick with those?

We can never replace our *meforshim*. The problem is that we are not always able to probe the true depths of what they say. And it is archaeology that can sometimes take our understanding of the *meforshim* to new levels.

For example, in *Parshas Beshalach* we learn how our ancestors, moving away from Egypt, were suddenly told to turn back. “Speak to the B’nei Yisroel that they should turn round and camp....in front of Baal Tzefon...” (*Shemos 14:2*). Why Baal Tzefon? Rashi tell us, *This one remained of all the gods of Egypt to mislead them into thinking that it was invincible* – i.e. to make the Egyptians think that whereas their other gods had failed against the G-d of Israel, this one was strong enough to withstand Him.

But what was special about Baal Tzefon that Hashem used it for His purpose? From material remains and written records we know that some three hundred years before Yaakov and his family settled in Goshen, Egypt was conquered by Asiatics known as the Hyksos. They brought their gods with them, among which was a North Semitic storm god called Baal Tzefon. As often happened in the ancient world, both the immigrants and the native population gradually came to identify the incoming gods with the indigenous ones. So it was that Baal Tzefon soon became identified with the Egyptian’s own storm god, and remained so even after the Hyksos had been driven out.

For reasons that are not entirely clear, the family of Ramesses II believed the Egyptian storm god to be their divine ancestor. And this was the lure. By making B’nei Yisroel turn back and camp near the desert shrine of Baal Tzefon, Pharaoh was led to think that whereas the other gods of Egypt had failed, his personal ancestor god would help him overcome the G-d of Israel and bring B’nei Yisroel back to slavery. At a stroke, archaeology has added a new dimension to our understanding of Rashi.

Archaeology also helps us fill in some of the gaps. The Torah is not a history book. Although much of it is set in a historical framework, its purpose is not to teach us history. Its purpose is to teach us how to live as Jews. For that reason it gives us just enough historical information to get its message across – which means that that it leaves many things unsaid. And this is where archaeology helps out.

A good example is the fate of Reuven, Gad and *chatzi* Menasheh. *Parshas Matos* tells us how they asked Moshe to give them their inheritance east of the Yarden, but apart from the fact that they were the first to be taken into Assyrian exile, little else is known about their fate. It is from archaeology that we know of what they suffered at the hands of a Moabite king.

Less than two hundred years after Dovid brought Moab under his control, their king, Meshah, rebelled and regained his independence (see *Melochim 2, chapter 3*). The Tanach does not tell us how this affected the tribes who lived east of the Yarden. However, a stone monument discovered in 1868 and written in a language similar to Hebrew, gives Meshah's own account of the revolt and its aftermath. He describes how he slaughtered the Israelites who lived there by the thousand, destroyed their cities and forced the rest into slave labour. Even allowing for the exaggeration and bombast so common to these kings' inscriptions, we understand that their fate was harsh.

Similarly, the Tanach (*Melochim 2, chapter 18*) tells us that when Sancheriv was preparing to attack Yerusholayim, he made his headquarters in Lachish, the second most important city in Yehudah at that time. What happened to the Jews of Lachish? The Tanach does not tell us. But carved in intricate detail on the walls of Sancheriv's palace (and now in the British Museum) are graphic scenes of the Assyrian attack, complete with depictions of whole families of Jewish captives being led away under armed guard. From the Tanach we know of Sancheriv's failure to take Yerusholayim; from archaeology we know the tragic fate of Lachish.

As well as specifics such as these there is another, more global (and more subtle) issue. The pages of Chumash and Nach record our ancestors' words and deeds so that we can learn from them and apply them to our own lives. But we are remote from the Tanach not only in time but also in the way we live our lives - our means of transport, of communications, the way we keep food hot, the way we keep it cold, the way we wash and dry our clothes, the medications available to us, the way we heat our homes in winter and cool them in summer and so on – are totally different. And because our lives are so different, it is sometimes difficult for us to think of the people in the Tanach as real human beings living real lives. We have a major conceptual chasm separating us from those we take to be our role models.

Archaeology can take us some way towards narrowing that gap. We can't step back in time and meet our ancestors. But we can see their household goods, their tools, their pictures carved on stone walls as well as those of their oppressors. We can see the remains of their food, remnants of their clothing, the coins they handled and letters they wrote. All of these and more combine to bring home to us the realness of their lives.

Those people seated round a table in the British Museum certainly felt this. Looking opened mouthed at that mud brick, they knew that they were reaching out across time and connecting with ancestors who were every bit as real as the object in front of them.

2. Does archaeology contradict the Tanach?

British archaeologist and broadcaster Paul Bahn defines archaeology as *the study of the human past through the systematic recovery and analysis of material culture*. Recovery means digging or diving, and what archaeologists find might be anything from a fragment of a clay pot to an entire sunken ship with its cargo intact. Texts incised into stone or clay tablets, or written on papyrus or potsherds are particularly valuable. And none of these things ever directly contradicts the Tanach - no one has ever found, or is ever likely to find, a written text claiming that the Israelites were not slaves in Egypt or that Shaul was not the first king of Israel.

But if bits of pottery, fragments of clothing or parts of weapons do not contradict the Tanach, the people who analyse them often do. There are several reasons why.

Archaeology may not be an exact science, but it is a highly sophisticated one involving experts specialising in a wide variety of fields - chemists who analyse the clay of ceramic pots, medical experts who examine human remains, astronomers who compute dates of eclipses mentioned in ancient documents and many others. Like any science it builds upon itself, using each new discovery to either corroborate existing theories or jettison outmoded ones. In this way archaeology gradually develops our understanding of the past.

At least, that's the theory. Sadly, it doesn't always work like that. Archaeologists often have their own pet theories which they can sometimes go to enormous lengths to defend. Canadian Professor of Archaeology Kevin McGeough acknowledges that scholarly opinions *often reflect more about a scholar's personal beliefs than historical reality*. So too Barry Kemp, Professor of Egyptology at Cambridge tells us that *explanatory models are developed to meet the expectations of researchers.....* He goes on to admit, with unusual candour, that interpreting archaeological finds *requires a huge amount of infilling*. It is this 'infilling' that often involves theories which are not consistent with the Tanach.

Pet theories become compounded where deep seated political beliefs are involved. One highly respected Egyptian archaeologist claims that since there is no direct evidence for an Israelite exodus from Egypt, it never happened. Sadly, he himself might not be aware that he may have other, non scholarly, motives for espousing such a viewpoint – he is an Arab, and to admit that there was an exodus would be tantamount to admitting that Jews have a right to Eretz Yisroel!

Archeological theories also come in fashions. William F. Albright, one of the most influential archeologists of the twentieth century, did accept much of the Tanach as an

accurate historical record. Over a forty year period ending in the late 1960s, he taught two generations of archaeologists to see their task (as Albright put it) as being ‘*to illuminate, to understand, and.....to prove the Bible*’ (my underlining).

However, since the 1980s, the pendulum has swung in the other direction. Typical of the new thinking is American archeologist, William Dever’s complaint that archeology was operating *altogether too narrowly within a theological angle of vision*. Archeology today is seen as *an independent, secular discipline ... pursued by cultural historians for its own sake*, with no intrinsic connection to the Tanach.

Understandably, although the current trend might be disturbing to anyone reading archeological works (and many might prefer not to) it is worth bearing in mind that fashions in archeology, like fashions elsewhere, can change.

In the light of all this (pet theories, political beliefs and the swing of fashion), it should surprise no one to learn that there are archaeologists who have a reputation for being dismissive of the Tanach. However, most of what these archaeologists write is based not on having material evidence that contradicts the Tanach but rather on not having evidence to corroborate it. In effect, what they are saying is that since no one has found an Egyptian inscription bearing the name Tzofnas Parneach that ‘proves’ that there was no such person. Others, more cautious about dismissing the Torah’s account point out that absence of evidence is not evidence of absence.

And in many cases, absence of evidence is exactly what we should expect. No ancient Egyptian or Babylonian ever stored his household goods and other artefacts in hermetically sealed containers so that some archaeologist living three thousand years later would find them. On the contrary, over the centuries tombs have been plundered, temples have been cannibalised for building materials and floods and soil erosion have forever obliterated valuable archaeological material. Whatever archaeologists do discover has survived by accident.

But realising that evidence is lacking can have startling effects. French archaeologists have been excavating the site of ancient Shushan since the mid 1800s. In the early 1960s, archaeologist Jean Perrot announced, with no small measure of excitement, that he had unearthed part of a royal audience chamber near the remains of what had once been the women’s quarters. He wrote of how the layout was such that someone coming from the harem towards the audience chamber would have entered to be faced by the king sitting on his throne ‘*opposite the entrance of the house*’ - exactly as described in Megillas Esther 5:1. Asked why it had not been discovered earlier, he replied, “*For the last hundred years we’ve been digging in the wrong place.*”

Israeli archaeologist Yigael Yadin often attributed his success to the fact that (as he put it) he dug with a spade in one hand and a Tanach in the other. Those who dismiss the Tanach and rely totally on what they find, miss out on so much. This is perhaps best illustrated with a short story.

It takes place in the far distant future, when all life on earth has been wiped out in a nuclear war. There are no buildings to be seen, no rivers, no mountains. The whole planet is covered with a thick layer of radioactive dust.

Archaeologists from a faraway planet arrive, curious to discover whether Earth ever bore life. Clad in protective clothing, they search and dig for months, but all in vain. Finally convinced that there was never life on Earth, they prepare to leave. As they pack their equipment away, one of the diggers finds a canister. Opening it carefully, they pull out a roll of film. Jubilant at their success, they take it back to their planet. Now at last they will know what life on earth was like.

Watching the film, they are amazed by what the earth creatures look like, how they live, what they do. They send copies to all the professors on their planet who analyse it and write scholarly books on it. Students study it, take their degrees in it, popular authors write novels based on it. It's the find of the century.

But amid all the excitement, one thing puzzles them. At the end of the film, four words appear on the screen. They can't read the letters and they don't know the language. But if they could, they would know that it read *A Walt Disney Production*.

Yes, they've been watching Donald Duck!

3. Using archaeology

In the last two sections we saw how utilising archaeological material can deepen our understanding of the *meforshim*, fill in some of the gaps in our knowledge and generate a sense of realness. We also looked at how archaeologists can be inordinately attached to their own pet theories, influenced by political attachments or just irrationally dismissive of the Tanach. The key questions now - relevant to kodesh teachers, those giving shiurim or, indeed, anyone learning Tanach – are how might we (a) access the appropriate archaeological material and (b) use it to enhance our learning?

Archaeological material can be accessed in two ways, illustrations and museum visits. . The advantage of illustrations is that they are readily available; one just has to find the right book or other source. However, illustrations are never a substitute for the real thing and this is where museums come into their own. The down side of museums, on the other hand, is that the relevant artefacts are widely scattered in collections throughout the world. Seeing them all is, therefore, somewhat impractical.

Before continuing, a word of caution about illustrations. Books, in particular children's books, sometimes contain artists' impressions of what they think life in Tanach times was like. Sadly, the artists themselves are often so ignorant of the subject matter that what they produce can actually mislead.

Haggodos are a classic example. There is hardly an illustrated haggodoh that does not contain desert scenes with pyramids in the background. Some even show what are

supposed to be B'nei Yisroel approaching the pyramids with bricks on their shoulders. What the artists seem not to know is that by the time Yaakov and his family arrived in Egypt, pharaohs were being interred in rock cut tombs in the Valley of the Kings. The last pharaoh to be buried in a pyramid died some two hundred years earlier. Not only that, but the stone blocks used to build the pyramids weighed over two tons each – no one could have carried them on their shoulders!

The book illustrations that we should be using are either photographs of real objects or architectural plans of buildings. These can be shown to classes or shiur groups with good effect using projection equipment. Alternatively, there is much in the public domain available to download and it is not difficult to put together a tailor made presentation specific to the needs of each shiur group.

As for museums, the British Museum in London possesses a huge amount of material relevant to the Tanach and is easily accessible for British visitors. The Bible Lands Museum in Yerushalayim also has an impressive collection but there is a major problem there. Many of the captions accompanying the exhibits are secular through and through and visitors really have to be careful, especially when taking children there. Even their map of the galleries, states *Abraham's belief in one G-d may have emerged from contemporary religious beliefs existing in this region*. This is actually a strange statement even from a secularist perspective as there was nothing remotely like belief in one G-d in contemporary Mesopotamia. Each city had a temple for its own patron god (Ur, Avrohom's birthplace, was the main centre for worshipping the moon-god and his wife) as well as temples of others and even guest rooms for gods who might want to visit! When chazal tell us *echod hoyoh Avrohom* – Avrohom was unique – it really was so.

However, used carefully, there are great advantages in viewing archaeological material. At the very least they give us some awareness of how our ancestors lived their lives. Pursuing the material a stage further can tell us much about places and events recorded in the Tanach. And by broadening the scope further still we can even gain some appreciation of our ancestors' thoughts and feelings as those loyal to Torah struggled with the religious and political influences of the major powers of the day.

There is yet a further, more relevant, dimension to all this. To illustrate the point and make my meaning clear I must first describe an exhibit in the British Museum (mentioned in the first article in this series) and explain how I use it when taking groups round.

The Assyrian kings used mass deportation as a means of controlling conquered peoples. The theory was simply enough - as long as people are living on their native soil they might rebel and try to regain their sovereignty. Deport them to some far away place where they feel no ties to the land and they will remain quiescent. So it was that when Sancheriv was preparing to attack Yerushalayim, he first took Lochish, a city about forty kilometres to the south, and deported its entire Jewish population. The battle is shown in graphic detail in a series of carvings that once adorned his palace in Nineveh.

The scene begins with serried rows of Assyrian infantrymen, archers and sling throwers in full body armour, approaching the hapless city. Next we see a siege ramp hard against the city wall. Assyrian soldiers are making their way up the ramp while the Jewish defenders fire down arrows (some of the actual arrowheads are on display in another corner of the gallery).

A battering ram is wheeled up to breach the wall. The Jewish defender hurl down flaming torches in an attempt to set it on fire. Assyrian soldiers douse it with water to thwart the attempt. Finally, the wall is breached. Lochish has fallen.

In the next scene we see Jewish families, men, women and children, being led away by armed Assyrians. Some are on donkeys, others are walking. All carry their few pitiful possessions in bags. The pathos of the scene contrasts starkly with the pleasant olive groves and date palms that surround them as they go into exile.

Then, beyond the scenes of sad eyed exiles, we see the Jewish leaders being subjected to horrific punishments. Others are on their knees before Sancheriv, who has been watching it all from the distance, pleading for their lives.

Twenty seven centuries later, these scenes, carved in intricate detail, still impress us with the might of the relentless military machine that was the Assyrian army. And we have no illusions about how the citizens of Yerusholayim felt when this same army made its camp outside their walls. They knew what their fate might be.

King Chizkiyohu went to the Beis haMikdosh to daven, and Yishayohu haNovi sent him a message assuring him that Sancheriv would never attack the city. The Tanach does not mention Chizkiyohu's reply. Presumably he simply accepted what Yishayohu said. Put in the context of those graphic carvings of the ferocious attack on Lochish, this gives us a tremendous insight into Chizkiyohu's total bitochon. Yishayohu had told him what Hashem would do, that was enough.

This is ultimately what the Tanach is for, to show us the level of bitachon a person is capable of and to bring us to an awareness that Hashem is always ready to take care of us if only we live our lives according to His will. The Tanach is there to show us how we might grow in yiras shomayim. Archaeology, used properly, can help us along the way.